



# JOE HILL

## Business on the Boardwalk

by

Susan Woodward Springer

from her book

"Seldovia, Alaska

An Historical Portrait of Life in Herring Bay"

Perhaps the best-known, most well-liked business on the entire waterfront was Joe Hill's Hall. "Joe Hill, a black man, was probably the finest man in town, and was highly respected by everyone," wrote Jim Busey. In testimony to his pure heart and character, Joe carried the distinction of being known as "the whitest man in all Seldovia."

When Jim and his parents came to Seldovia in 1928, Joe ran a pool hall and barber shop. After fire destroyed the business, Joe relocated to a larger building at the mouth of the Seldovia Slough. Joe's second location "included the same facilities as previously, plus a large dance hall that was used for [ a ] city auditorium, dance hall, school graduations, and other important public events. Joe was especially liked because of his high standards of personal conduct. Contrary to the more usual practice in Seldovia, he did not drink; and he was well informed, an interesting and literate person, who played an important role among numbers of admiring people, young and old." (Busey). From the Russian Christmas masquerade dances to basket socials benefiting one cause or another to plays put on and performed by the Seldovia Women's Club, Joe Hill's Hall played host to most social events in town.

Perhaps a more important role played by Joe was a quiet one: that of local philanthropist. Stories still circulate about how Joe carried more than one fishing family through a hard winter, or financed a boat for others. Seldovian Albert Wilson recalls being taken care of by Joe Hill. Circumstances prevented his staying at home for a period as a child, and so he went to live with Joe, who fixed him breakfast each morning and hustled him off to school.

After prohibition, Joe added a tavern to his multifaceted hall, but it was said he permitted no misconduct there. The tavern and dance hall were separate from one another, so that youngsters could enjoy a dance while some of their elders whiled away the evening in the tavern. The tavern business created employment for a number of local boys. In the winter, Joe provided big toothed saws with which ice could be cut from Susan Lake. The boys hauled the cut ice to Joe's on a sled and stacked it, and then covered it with sawdust. Joe paid them \$5.00 a ton, and used ice to cool his beer through the warmer months. A typical winter's store of ice was as much as 23 tons.

Joe was known for not picking up things off his floor. Instead, like most buildings along the boardwalk, his had a trap door through which debris was swept onto the beach. Included in Joe's debris were half gallon and

continued on page 46.

# EDITORIAL

This month we are please to bring you information on a prominent merchant from Seldovia. Presumably, Joe Hill is one of the few black businessmen to issue a token. It would be interesting to make a list of other African Americans to have issued tokens in Alaska. Your editor will be waiting for your submissions.

Thanks go to Susan Woodward Springer for granting permission to us to reprint the information about Joe Hill. Mrs. Springer's book is an excellent addition to the local histories of Alaska towns.

Accompanying this issue are the Alaska lots from our auction scheduled for November 17. The number of lots is down from previous auctions, due to a lack of good material. We have been blessed the last few years with some really great items. We knew it could not last, but we are anxiously awaiting the next exciting consignment!

Also included is our once in a millennium price list. All 14 pages of it. As I write this, I don't know when this will go in the mail. I will be out of town from Oct. 13 to Oct. 27. Orders received during this time will be filled in the order in which they were received after Oct. 27.

Yes, I will be making my annual religious pilgrimage to Phoenix in October. My absence from the store will be a week longer than usual, as I will first go to Massachusetts to visit my mother (who undoubtedly will tell me, again, I am too old to be playing baseball). Maybe so, but they can have my baseball bat when they pry it from my dead cold fingers.

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## GANDER \$2 TRADE TOKEN



The 20th in an annual series of municipal trade tokens, featuring well known types of aircraft that have refueled at Gander, Newfoundland was issued in June of 2001 by the Gander and Area Chamber of Commerce.

The obverse commemorates the 50th anniversary of the first trans-Atlantic crossing from Aldergrove, Northern Ireland to Gander, Newfoundland by a jet powered aircraft, a Royal Air Force Canberra bomber. A side view of a Canberra bomber is featured.

The Canberra bomber was developed by the English Electric Company for the Royal Air Force. The prototype first flew on May 13, 1949. The aircraft has a length of 65 feet 6 inches and a wing span of 63 feet 11.5 inches and is powered by twin 7,500 pound thrust Rolls Royce Avon 109 Turbojets. Its top speed is 620 miles per hour, has a service ceiling between 45,000 and 50,000 feet and a range of 3,000 miles using wing tip tanks. The Royal Air Force still fly the Canberra bomber. It is a remarkable achievement for an aircraft to be in service for such a long time.

The reverse commemorates the 20th annual issue (1982 to 2001) by the Gander and Area Chamber of Commerce.

Doug Seaward of Gander designed the token. It was struck by Lawrence Medal Art, Etobicoke, Ontario.

Struck on 33mm blanks, he token is available in nickel-bonded-steel for \$2.75 and gold plated nickel-bonded-steel for \$9.95 (price postpaid) from Gander and Area Chamber of Commerce, 109 Trans Canada Highway, Gander, Newfoundland, Canada A1V 1P6.

A brochure containing descriptive data on aircraft depicted on each of Gander's 20 Aviation Dollars and a price list of back issues available in nickel-bond-steel and gold plated NBS is available free of charge from the Gander and Area Chamber of Commerce.

-Jerry Remick

## JOE HILL, cont...

gallon wine jugs. Children picked these up off the beach and sold them back to Joe for a quarter apiece. This was a smart move on Joe's part, for the youngsters generally turned right around and handed back the money as entrance to the latest moving picture show. The beach below Joe's was also a favorite place for children to scavenge for money - change mostly, but on rare occasion a greenback. He neglected to sort this out from the end-of-an-evening rubbish on the floor, so out onto the beach it was swept!



Joe Hill showed movies twice a week, with phonograph or live piano music preceding the picture. He ran the whole operation himself, and took time to lecture young people who came in for a haircut. In fact, it is said that with Joe trying to tend bar and oversee the pool hall while running the barbershop, a haircut could take the better part of a leisurely afternoon.

On December 3, 1940, Joe Hill faced a second fire, and his famous dance hall/pool hall/movie theatre/tavern/barbershop burned to the ground. Joe later rebuilt and operated the Polar Bar until retiring to Philadelphia. There he spent the last years of his life involved in the Civil Rights movement.

Several years ago, a friend of mine was mucking about in the slough below where Joe Hill's used to stand. To his delight, he found a china barber pole, about 6" high and still bearing its red and white striping. It was hollow, with a good sized slot in the top. We realized he had found the receptacle for Joe's used razor blades! An insignificant treasure to be sure, but still somehow proof for us 1990s folk that this great man did indeed exist.

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**"Seldovia, Alaska; An Historical Portrait of Life in Herring Bay"** by Susan Woodward Springer is a large paperbound book, 240 pages. We have copies available for \$24.95 plus \$3 for postage and insurance. Send orders to A.R.C., P.O. Box 72832, Fairbanks, Alaska 99707. If you are ordering additional items, please remember only \$3 postage, total.

## MUG UP DEFINED

While reading Mrs. Springer's book "Seldovia, Alaska," we found an example of, and thus a definition of "Mug Up."

"After the game was over, the men would have a "mug up," a term borrowed from the maritime industries where hands would duck inside the ship's cabin for a hot drink and a bite to eat. The poker club mug-up consisted of a hot dish of chili and beans, and sandwiches made of chopped garlic and homemade mayonnaise. It is not known for sure if the purpose of such fragrant fare was to deceive the local marshal (ed. note - prohibition was in force) should he be encountered later in the evening, or to avoid detection by the wives waiting at home."

Based on the chit booklet in our last issue, it is obvious that this term was used in the fishing industry at their shore based canning facilities.

## MAVERICK IDENTIFIED

The J.R.S. Craig tokens in the A.R.C. March 2001 auction were issued by John R. Smith, cigars and billiards, 1919-1924. Ron Benice

## SPITSBERGEN

**Coin News**, published in Great Britain, has a nice article about Spitsbergen and its coinage in the October issue. The author, Mr. James MacKay visited Spitsbergen on a cruise and mentions the 1993 coinage being sold as souvenirs. These were quickly withdrawn at the request of the Norwegian government. No mention is made of the 1998 coinage.

This lends additional weight to the claim that the 1998 coins are not coins, but "fantasies," made by Mr. Walter Jellum in the July 2001 issue of *World Coin News*.

This is a sad turn of events, but one that is not unprecedented in numismatics. There are many "fantasy" issues that have been manufactured in the recent and not so recent past. Some have very interesting histories, such as Araucania & Patagonia (1874 and 1888) or the Nation of Celestial Space (founded in 1948 and coins issued 1959 to 1961) based in Illinois!



# FOR THE RECORD



**CHATANIKA:** Chatanika Lodge, Good for one drink. Gold on blue plastic, 28mm



**MAVERICK:** There was a Red Dog Saloon in Juneau. Five cents in trade, red on wood. Can any of you Juneauites attribute this one?

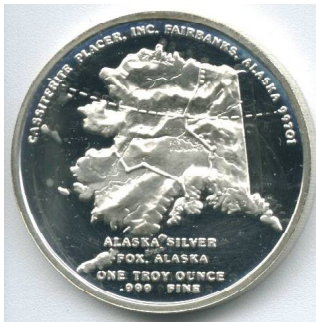


**DOUGLAS:** Snowbirds, good for one drink. Gold on black plastic, 40mm.



**MAVERICK:** Another maverick wooden nickel. The Fourteen Point One. 14.1 Mile someplace???

The above two woods came in with an old accumulation. Really could be from anyplace, but we are hoping that someone recognizes them.



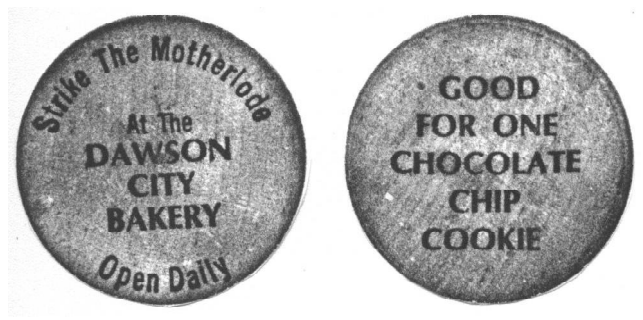
**FOX:** Cassiterite Placer, Inc., 2000. One troy ounce .999 silver, 39mm. Similar to the 1993 issue. We have not seen the gold mate to this date yet.



**PRUDHOE BAY:** Alpine 2000 (Alpine Oil Field). One ounce silver with gold highlighting.



**JUNEAU:** Juneau Hilton, complimentary cocktail. White on blue poker chip plastic, 39mm



**DAWSON, YUKON:** Dawson City Bakery, good for one chocolate chip cookie. Ah, a wood we can sink our teeth into! (submitted by Brian Denman).



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